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RE-WORKING THE COUNT DRACULA MYTH, RE-NEGOTIATING CLASS IDENTITY: THE TRANSNATIONAL VAMPIRE GOES TO LATE-1950s ITALY

PREPRACOVANIE DRAKULOVSKÉHO
MÝTU, ZJEDNANIE TRIEDNEJ IDENTITY:
TRANSNACIONÁLNY UPÍR V TALIANSKU
50. ROKOV

Michael Guarneri

ABSTRACT The author analyzes how the myth of transnational vampire Count Dracula as a polluting 'foreign body' to be destroyed for the greater good of society was drastically re-worked in *Tempi duri per i vampiri* (Steno [Stefano Vanzina], 1959), an Italian comedy film made to cash in on Hammer's box-office hit *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958). The article conceives of *Tempi duri per i vampiri* (literally, "Hard times for vampires") as a satirical work that taps into the anxieties afflicting certain segments of Italian society at the inception of the period of large, traumatic socio-economic change known as 'the Italian economic miracle.' After having explored the shadows lurking behind the film's generally light and optimistic tone, *Tempi duri per i vampiri* eventually emerges as a cruel parable of class struggle in which human characters must learn from the vampire how to re-negotiate their ancestral class identity in order to avoid extinction.

KEY WORDS Dracula, transnational vampire, Italian genre cinema, Italian economic miracle, class struggle

ABSTRAKT Príspevok analyzuje to, ako bol mýtus o transnacionálnom upírovi grófovi Draculovi ako o znečisťujúcom „cudzom objekte“, ktorý má byť zničený pre vyššie dobro spoločnosti, prepracovaný v *Tempi duri per i vampiri* (Steno [Stefano Vanzina], 1959), teda v talianskej komédii natočenej za účelom zarobenia na kinohite *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958) z dielne štúdia Hammer. Príspevok predstavuje *Tempi duri per i vampiri* („Ťažké časy pre upírov“) ako satiru obáv talianskej spoločnosti na počiatku obdobia veľkej, traumatickej socio-ekonomickej zmeny známej ako „Taliansky ekonomický zázrak“. Po preskúmaní „tieňa“ za ľahkým a optimistickým tónom filmu sa *Tempi duri per i vampiri* napokon vyjaví ako kruté podobenstvo triedneho zápasu, v ktorom sa ľudské postavy musia od upírov naučiť, ako zjednať svoju zdedenú triednu identitu, aby sa vyhli vyhynutiu.

KLÚČOVÉ SLOVÁ Dracula, transnacionálny upír, talianska žánrová kinematografia, taliansky ekonomický zázrak, triedy zápas

Vampires are quintessential creatures of ‘in-betweenness’: they are dead and alive, human and bestial, lovely and deadly, sexy and repugnant, local and transnational. The present article concerns itself with the latter dichotomy. Local vampires are generally depicted as territorial animals feeding on blood in their own ancestral land, which functions as a hunting preserve. For instance, in Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 novella *Carmilla* and in Hammer film *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958), the title-characters never go further than a few hours’ coach ride from their home-crypt to quench their thirst. However, since entering popular culture with William Polidori’s 1819 short story *The Vampyre*, vampires have shown an increasing tendency to become not only transmedial, branching out from literature to theater and cinema, but also transnational, crossing geographical borders and expanding their native domain: like living beings, the undead tend to seek the best ecosystem, move with the times and adapt in order to survive.

Vampire-characters found their ideal habitat in the international film industry between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. After a Hollywood-studios monopoly that started with Universal’s *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and lasted almost three decades, the worldwide box-office success of Hammer’s *Dracula* in the late 1950s triggered a vampire cinema production frenzy all over the globe, with an estimated total of around 400 vampire-themed movies made throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Ursini – Silver, 1975, p. 123; Murphy, 1979, pp. ix-xi). Coming from England, United States, Mexico, Italy, France, Spain, West Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, South and South-East Asia, such vampire films – and those from non-Anglophone countries in particular – greatly re-worked the original material from British Gothic literature in order to appeal to their national audiences.

My case study, Italian production *Tempi duri per i vampiri* (Steno [Stefano Vanzina], 1959), is an early example of the transnational 1950s-1970s vampire film boom. Featuring Christopher Lee at his second Dracula impersonation, *Tempi duri per i vampiri* was clearly meant to cash in on the 1958 *Dracula*, which was the 27th highest-grossing film of the 1958-1959 season at the Italian box office.¹ However, comedy specialist Steno and his screenwriters didn't simply re-make the Hammer film in hopes of replicating its success in both the international and the Italian market. Specifically targeting the Italian 'general public,' the makers of *Tempi duri per i vampiri* brought to the screen a hybrid between the vampire film and two Italian 'light comedy' sub-genres that were very popular in late-1950s Italy – the 'summer holiday' movie² and the *musicarello* movie (i.e., a romantic comedy about star-crossed young lovers punctuated by musical performances).³ Producer Mario Cecchi Gori cast as the male lead singer and comedy actor Renato Rascel, a veteran superstar of the Italian showbusiness, while recently-risen international horror star Christopher Lee was hired in a supporting role. These decisions were probably taken because, at that time, horror cinema 'made in Italy' wasn't a lucrative business: *I vampiri* (Riccardo Freda, 1957), which is generally considered the first Italian hor-

1 The top-100 list of the highest-grossing films of the 1958-1959 season in Italy can be found at <http://www.hitparadeitalia.it/bof/boi/boi1958-59.htm>.

2 The advertising for *Tempi duri per i vampiri* on the September 10th 1959 issue of Italian magazine *Mascotte spettacolo: decennale fotografico d'informazione dello spettacolo* relies almost exclusively on pictures of supporting actresses Kai Fischer, Sylva Koscina and Susanne Loret in bikini, while the horror theme and the presence of stars Renato Rascel and Christopher Lee are mentioned only briefly in the very short accompanying text (cf. Anonymous, 1959, pp. 12-13).

3 The film's end-credits song, *Dracula cha-cha-cha*, was a sensational hit in Italy during the summer of 1959 (De' Rossignoli, 1961, p. 349), to the point that it was used in a famous scene of Rome-set MGM drama *Two Weeks in Another Town* (Vincente Minnelli, 1962).

ror film proper (Venturini, 2014, pp. 103-112; Hunter, 2016, pp. 15-29), had in fact bombed at the domestic box office, grossing a mere 125.261.762 lira between April 1957 and April 1964 (Rondolino – Levi, 1967, p. 128).⁴ As a result, horror-comedy-romance *Tempi duri per i vampiri* did fairly well at the Italian box office: rated “per tutti” [all ages admitted],⁵ it grossed 530.445.618 lira between October 1959 and April 1964 (Rondolino – Levi, 1967, p. 151)⁶, while remaining largely unknown abroad in spite of Lee’s presence.⁷

With regard to the bloodsucker’s transnationality *within* vampire narratives, a survey of literary and cinematic vampire fiction from 1819 up to the early 1960s shows that horror is the most common emotional response to the vampire’s peregrinations, as the concepts usually evoked by writers and filmmakers in relation to the bloodsucking globetrotter are foreign invasion, contagion and defilement of both the human body and the host nation’s body politics. Indeed, literature and film scholars consider xenophobia-tinged political paranoia as the cornerstone of most vampire narratives, with 19th-century Eastern warlord Count Dracula and his 20th-century left-wing or rightwing offspring repeatedly going West to wreak havoc during the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* (Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*) (Arata, 1997, pp. 462-470), Weimar Republic (F. W. Murnau’s 1922 film *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*) (Kracauer, 1971, pp. 77-79; Monaco, 1976, pp. 124-141; Roth,

4 The highest-grossing Italian film released in 1957, *Belle ma povere* (Dino Risi, 1957), made almost seven times that much over the same period (Rondolino – Levi, 1967, p. 119).

5 The State Censorship certificate for Steno’s film – nulla osta no. 30310 – can be found in the online database www.italiataglia.it. The Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (essentially, the Catholic Church Censorship) didn’t appreciate *Tempi duri per i vampiri* at all, rating it “E” for “Escluso” [Excluded, forbidden for all]. See Centro Cattolico Cinematografico, 1959, p. 214: “The satire of vampirism is just an excuse to make a frivolous, superficial film. Moral judgement: The film weaves together scenes and situations that are equivocal and improper. Escluso.” This and all the Italian texts that follow have been translated by the author of the present article.

6 The highest-grossing Italian film released in 1959, *La Grande Guerra* (Mario Monicelli, 1959), made twice as much over the same period (Rondolino – Levi, 1967, p. 148).

7 In the United States *Tempi duri per i vampiri* circulated on television under the title *Uncle was a Vampire*, as part of a 32-film ‘package’ announced by Embassy Pictures in December 1962: see Heffernan, 2004, p. 238. Thanks to a short review published in the October-November 1962 issue of the French film magazine *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*, we know that the film opened in Paris on August 8th 1962, distributed by Procidis under the title *Les temps sont durs pour les vampires*.

1979, p. 310; Roberts, 2008, pp. 44-49), Great Depression (Universal's *Dracula*) (Skal, 2004, pp. 194-195), World War II (Robert Siodmak's *Son of Dracula* and Lew Landers's *The Return of the Vampire*, both released theatrically in 1943) (Rasmussen, 1998, pp. 200-201; Abbott, 2007, p. 64) and Cold War (Paul Landres's 1958 film *The Return of Dracula*) (Murphy, 1979, p. 68; Hendershot, 2001, pp. 50-51; Abbott, 2007, pp. 71-72): if "horror cycles emerge in times of social stress, and [...] the genre is a means through which the anxieties of an era can be exposed" (Carroll, 1990, p. 207), the demonization of the transnational bloodsucker is fundamental to make Dracula a threatening "Other," an alien evil to be hated, disowned and destroyed for the greater good of society (Hatlen, 1988, pp. 117-135; Gergely, 2012, pp. 92-99).

There are exceptions to the rule, though, and *Tempi duri per i vampiri* is one of them. In Steno's film, crucially set in Italy in the early years of the period of large, traumatic socio-economic change known as 'Italian economic miracle,' the bloodsucking foreigner (Christopher Lee) is no hell spawn bent on the corruption and subjugation of a given nation in times of crisis. Instead, he acts as a somewhat benign, if creepy, magical helper, teaching a disgraced Italian Baron beset by identity anxieties (Renato Rascel) to adapt to the new socio-economic reality of the 'boom years' and avoid extinction. Through a close reading of *Tempi duri per i vampiri*, I therefore wish to present a little-known 'local alternative' to the dominant readings of transnational vampire Count Dracula as a parasite-tyrant, and highlight the "cultural instrumentality," i.e. the socio-cultural specificity and topicality of the vampire metaphor within its national context of production and reception (Kuhn, 1990, pp. 1-10).

Baron Roderico of Bramfurten is a vampire who has been living in his ancestral castle in the Carpathians for 400 years, ruling as an absolute master over the region. The Italian screenwriters couldn't call him 'Dracula' for possible copyright issues with Universal and Hammer, but Roderico is played by Christopher Lee, and the huge 'D' emblazoned on his white coffin leaves little doubt about his actual

identity. *Tempi duri per i vampiri* opens in the Summer of 1959: as Roderico's castle is about to be demolished to make room for a nuclear power plant, a hearse hastily leaves the manor headed for Frankfurt train station, where Roderico's old butler 'mails' his master to Italian Baron Osvaldo Lambertenghi, Roderico's nephew, last living descendant and only heir. We'll be back to this butler who, in spite of being a very minor character screen-time-wise, is a crucial figure in the sociological design of the film.

Meanwhile, just like Roderico has been chased away from his ancestral Carpathian domain by the march of progress, in the Italy of the economic miracle Osvaldo is forced to sell the family manor to a hotel company, because of debts and taxes. Wanting to take advantage of the booming economy and consequent increase in consumption, the businessmen running the company promptly turn the historical place into a commodity – a luxury resort for foreign tourists, for the traditional Italian *haute bourgeoisie* and, above all, for the Italian 'new rich' created by the economic miracle. The latter are in fact particularly anxious to show off their money and "convert" the newly-acquired "economic capital" into "social capital": borrowing from a trailblazing 1979 anthropological inquiry into the taste of the French dominant and dominated classes, we could say that the Italian *nouveau riches* of the late 1950s are willing to pay any price to display their "distance from necessity," in hopes of cleansing the stigma of their miser, small-bourgeois past and enter the "dominant" group of the traditional *haute bourgeoisie*. Apparently, money is the next best thing to blood for people who seek social "distinction" but were not born into an upper class family (Bourdieu, 2010, pp. 46-48, 95-108, 119-164, 180-206, 272).

Contrary to the rampant bourgeois of the boom years, Osvaldo is doing rather poorly in late-1950s Italy. Having lost his ancestral home, he is suddenly deprived of his past, identity, class and status, and finds himself in a 'sink or swim' situation, a battle for survival in a hostile environment. Forced to start a new life, he is hired as a bellboy by the hotel company in what seems to be a 'bourgeois vengeance' against the aristocrat. In fact, as a bellboy, Baron Osvaldo is constantly bossed around and humiliated not only by the big businessmen who bought him out of his castle, but also by their clerical, middle- and small-bourgeois subordinates such as the hotel manager and the concierge. An exchange between the latter and bellboy Osvaldo is particularly revealing: having addressed the concierge with the informal expression "Giovane" [Young man], Osvaldo is harshly reminded that "When you talk to a superior, you must call him *Cavaliere* [Sir] and

use the courtesy form.” And, of course, in the film there is a stereotypical Milanese *cumenda* (Federico Collino) – an old, fat, uneducated, arrogant *nouveau riche* who wants to be accepted among the *haute bourgeois* elite: adding insult to injury, the *cumenda* calls Osvaldo’s castle “an authentic antiquity” and invades it to acquire nobility by osmosis.

No matter how humiliated by the symbolical (and sometimes also physical) violence of the bourgeoisie,⁸ Osvaldo sticks to his noble principles and tries to maintain aristocratic behavior and dignity. For instance, in the *musicarello* subplot of the film concerning the love story between the *cumenda*’s daughter Carla (Sylva Koscina) and pop singer Victor (Rik van Nutter), Carla sends Osvaldo on an errand and he refuses to accept her generous tip as a display of both chivalry and nobility’s disinterest in money. Such *beau geste* doesn’t impress anybody except Osvaldo’s love-interest Lillina (Antie Geerk), a twenty-something poor garden-er who has worked for Osvaldo all her life, like all her relatives before her. Lillina loves Osvaldo as much as he loves her, but the two do not give in to passion: Osvaldo doesn’t because, as a disgraced Baron, he cannot afford to “cover [Lillina] with gold and jewels”; Lillina doesn’t because she thinks of herself as a poor servant unworthy of an aristocrat’s love (until the very end of the film, she keeps calling Osvaldo “Signor Barone,” even if, after the sale of his estate, he holds the title only formally). Evidently the main obstacle to the interclass romance is that both lovers refuse to let go of the past. It is in this stalemate situation that Lee’s Dracula appears as a *deus ex machina* to teach Osvaldo not to worry, to forget about aristocracy, become a ‘carnivorous’ bourgeois and love the boom.

As already mentioned, horror literature and film studies traditionally conceive of transnational Dracula as an alien vermin, a polluting ‘foreign body.’ Yet, according to the racial pedigree outlined by Stoker for his Count, Dracula is a descendant of some of the noblest, strongest warriors in

8 For the concept of “symbolic violence,” see Bourdieu –ß Wacquant, 2004, pp. 272–274.

History.⁹ If life is a struggle in which only the fittest survive, the Un-Dead certainly possesses the willpower and the skills to crush his competitors: he is a fighter, a survivor, and so is Roderico in *Tempi duri per i vampiri*. Abruptly evicted from his Carpathian castle, Roderico wastes no time in melancholic brooding and relocates himself in a new habitat, Italy, which he assumes to be backwards enough to allow him to keep on living as a feudal landlord. Unfortunately for him, Italy has just had a late industrial revolution fostered by the American dollars of the European Recovery Program, and 'old-school' aristocrats like Osvaldo are dinosaurs bound to extinction. However, the transnational vampire has no intention of lying down and dying. As the family crypt in Osvaldo's castle has been desecrated and turned into an American bar, Roderico simply sleeps under the barman's counter; with no female peasants in sight, he feasts on Nordic top models... His capacity to adapt seems almost limitless, just like that of Stoker's Dracula, who is an aristocrat warlord, a *haute bourgeois* dealing in London estates, a wonderful petty bourgeois solicitor, a working-class handyman helping out carriers, and even a servant, making the bed and cooking for unsuspecting guest Jonathan Harker.

Osvaldo, on the other hand, doesn't seem able to adjust to his new life as a bellboy. He tells Roderico "You must adapt, uncle," but for Osvaldo 'adapting' means passively accepting circumstances – that's why he ends up at the mercy of rampant bourgeois who wish him dead. Drastic measures need to be taken if Osvaldo is to be saved, and Roderico chooses the most drastic of them all, passing on the curse of vampirism to his nephew. The shock treatment works: once vamped, Osvaldo overcomes his mild, romantic, melancholic nature, and becomes aggressive, willing to fight for living space and privilege in the Italian social arena („During the day you are a stupid dummy, this is why you lost the castle," he contemptuously snarls to his human-self in front of the mirror). First of all, Osvaldo 'bites'

9 Cf. Stoker, 1980, p. 33: "We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship. Here, in the whirlpool of European races, the Ugric tribe bore down from Iceland the fighting spirit which Thor and Wodin gave them, which their Berserkers displayed to such fell intent on the seaboard of Europe, ay, and of Asia and Africa too, till the peoples thought that the were-wolves themselves had come. Here, too, when they came, they found the Huns, whose warlike fury had swept the earth like a living flame, till the dying peoples held that in their veins ran the blood of those old witches, who, expelled from Scythia had mated with the devils in the desert. Fools, fools! What devil or what witch was ever so great as Attila, whose blood is in these veins?"

42 female guests of the hotel in one night, claiming a medieval *droit du seigneur* over the daughters and wives of the wealthy bourgeoisie. Secondly, Osvaldo proceeds to scare the businessmen, the hotel manager and the *cumenda*, thus getting revenge on those who belittled him earlier in the film. It is only after having proved his manhood to his social superiors that the now-confident Osvaldo regains his ancestral castle. He can't buy it back because he has no money, but with some cunning and Roderico's help, he convinces the businessmen from the hotel company to appoint him as the new hotel manager. Finally, Osvaldo gets his dream girl Lillina, rescuing her last-minute from a half-hearted, semi-serious assault by Roderico.

In the end, Osvaldo feels too grateful to stake his vampire uncle, so Baron Roderico is left free to go his way with two Nordic top models. As for Osvaldo, he has fallen from the heights of nobility, but he has landed on his feet because he successfully adapted into a bourgeois clerk. He might not own the castle like in the good old days, but he is the man in charge, he runs the place. Borrowing from Peter Hutchings's analysis of class relations in Hammer's *Dracula* and 1950s England, the parable of the Italian vampire can be conceived of as the transformation of a self-pitying, disgraced aristocrat into a „Carnivore“ bourgeois whose ruthlessness is an affirmation of his “inalienable right to lead” (Hutchings, 2003, pp. 58-59). However, the aristocracy is not the only class in need to re-negotiate its ancestral identity in late-1950s Italy. Osvaldo will marry Lillina, whom marriage elevates from feudal slavery to bourgeois status, allowing her to survive the disappearance of the class that traditionally offered servants protection in exchange for total submission. So it seems that in the grimly-titled *Tempi duri per i vampiri* (literally, “Hard times for vampires”) there is a happy ending for everybody. There is a person who tragically dies in the film, though: it is Baron Roderico's old servant, who commits suicide at Frankfurt train station after having ‘mailed’ his master to Italy. This is the proverbial exception that confirms the rule. “May I kill myself?” asks

the butler to his master, submissive until the very end. After having been granted permission to 'take leave,' he melancholically adds "What kind of life is left for me anyway?" and throws himself under the carriage of a passing train like Princess Anna Karenina. Contrary to Baron Roderico, Baron Osvaldo and serf Lillina, the old servant can't face the downfall of aristocracy and goes extinct like every being that doesn't possess the will and the skills to adapt to a changing environment.

The opening credits feature the disclaimer: "The characters of this film are absolutely imaginary." Of course they are not, because *Tempi duri per i vampiri* is a work of satire meant to comment on actual social dynamics in the early years of the Italian economic boom. The effects of the boom on the working class are not at all explored: 1958-1959 probably was too early to assess how the booming economy, new affluence and consumerism impacted factory workers and peasants. The film focuses on the middle-class instead, by thematizing the downfall of aristocracy and the upward mobility of servants and new rich from the small bourgeoisie. As we have seen, with the Italian economic miracle unsettling the traditional socio-economic order, characters must re-negotiate their ancestral identity or die. The example for them to follow is that of the transnational vampire, whose 'in-betweenness,' for once, is shown to be a winning quality instead of being demonized. Coherently, in *Tempi duri per i vampiri* there is no Van-Helsing-character to re-establish law and order: in the Italy of the boom, however frightening, identity uncertainty, social fluidity and downright chaos are harbingers of new possibilities for self-fulfillment and social promotion – everything is up for grabs and one needs a set of strong, sharp canines to survive, since it's dog eat dog and herbivores get eaten first. Perfectly attuned to "the aggressive and pragmatic spirit of Boom Italy" (Curti, 2011, pp. 88-89), Steno's film at the same time pays heed to the will of ruling party Democrazia Cristiana [Christian Democracy] to make Italy's great leap forward into modernity less traumatic as possible. As a matter of fact, *Tempi duri per i vampiri* advocates for the necessity of restraint and moderation, the triumphing bourgeois of the happy ending being a *via media*, a midway compromise, literally a marriage between the disappearing, traditional highest class (feudal aristocracy) and the lowest (serfdom). Therefore, Osvaldo embraces certain predatory aspects of his vampiric uncle like determination, cunning, self-confidence, but rejects others, for instance preferring middle-class monogamy and work ethics to the sexual excesses and unproductivity of Baron Roderico. Yet, in spite of its

‘we’re in the money’ Ultrascope-Technicolor photography and generally light, optimistic tone, *Tempi duri per i vampiri* strikes some pretty sombre notes that resonate with the ‘apocalyptic’ critique of the boom to be found in coevous Italian auteur films like *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Luchino Visconti, 1960) and *Mamma Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962). Steno and his screenwriters certainly were no Marxists, but their representation of the carnivorous middle-class’s power to incorporate all other classes, including its traditional antagonist the aristocracy, possibly alludes to the rise of a creepy “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” (Manzoli, 2012, p. 39), the vampires among us.

Filmography

Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens [film]. Directed by Friedrich Wilhelm MURNAU. Germany, 1922.

Dracula [film]. Directed by Tod BROWNING. USA, 1931.

Son of Dracula [film]. Directed by Robert SIODMAK. USA, 1943.

The Return of the Vampire [film]. Directed by Lew LANDERS. USA, 1943.

Belle ma povere [film]. Directed by Dino RISI. Italy, 1957.

I vampiri [film]. Directed by Riccardo FREDA. Italy, 1957.

The Return of Dracula [film]. Directed by Paul LANDRES. USA, 1958.

Dracula [film]. Directed by Terence FISHER. England, 1958.

Tempi duri per i vampiri [film]. Directed by STENO [Stefano VANZINA]. Italy, 1959.

La Grande Guerra [film]. Directed by Mario MONICELLI. Italy, 1959.

Rocco e i suoi fratelli [film]. Directed by Luchino VISCONTI. Italy, 1960.

Mamma Roma [film]. Directed by Pier Paolo PASOLINI. Italy, 1962.

Two Weeks in Another Town [film]. Directed by Vincente MINNELLI. Italy, 1962.

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